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Improving Undergraduates' Personal Development and Character Building to enhance Graduate Employability

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Abstract:

Graduate unemployment is a major issue in many countries including Malaysia. One of the top reasons for graduate unemployment in Malaysia, according to a recent survey of Malaysian employers, is poor character or attitude among university graduates. Malaysian universities are undertaking various initiatives to enhance character education. This paper reports on a study which reviews the effectiveness of a campus wide program that was implemented by a Malaysian public university between 2011-2013 that aimed to facilitate personal development and character building among its undergraduates. In line with the feedback obtained from students and lecturers on the aforesaid program, this paper puts forward some recommendations for improvement of future programs which aimed to enhance character education among university undergraduates. It is hoped that this study could make a small contribution towards national efforts to develop virtuous and highly marketable graduates.

Key words: Character Education, Graduate Unemployment, Soft skills development.

1. Introduction

A number of factors have been cited as causes of graduate unemployment including the current global economic slowdown, skills mismatch and the lack of soft skills. A recent survey of Malaysian employers cited poor character and attitude as one of the reasons for graduate unemployment in Malaysia (Leo, 2016).

The Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (M. o. E. Malaysia, 2012) and the National Graduate Employability Blueprint 2012-2017 (M. o. H. E. Malaysia, 2012) have emphasized the need for local institutions of higher learning to produce holistic graduates. In line with the aforesaid national aspirations, Malaysian public universities are implementing various programs to develop student character and instil good moral values.

In 2011-2013, UUM implemented its Employability and Enhancement Programme (EEP) which comprises two modules, namely EEP 1032 which is entitled "Personal Development and Character Building" and EEP 2032 which is entitled "Living in the Multi-Cultural Society". Both the EEP 1032 and EEP 2032 are aimed at cultivating various soft skills. Unfortunately, both the EEP 1032 and

EEP 2032 were not well received by both UUM students and lecturers. The objective of this paper is report on the results of a study on the effectiveness of EEP 1032 in achieving its course objectives in assisting undergraduates in "personal development and character building" with the aim to provide inputs on how such programs can be improved in the future.

2. Methodology

This study employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches in order to achieve a better insights on the research issues. A survey questionnaire was used to gather quantitative data and interviews were also conducted to gain further insights. The data presented in this paper is part of a larger research project. The profile of the valid respondents for assessing the effectiveness of EEP 1032 comprises 525 students is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Respondents' profile ($N = 525$)

	Classification	n	%
Gender	Female	411	78.3
	Male	114	21.7

College	CAS	60	11.4
	COB	306	58.3
	COLGIS	159	30.3
Nationality	Malaysian	519	98.9
	Non-Malaysian	6	1.1
Ethnicity	Chinese	190	36.2
	Indian	19	3.6
	Malay	291	55.4
	Peribumi Sabah	8	1.5
	Peribumi Sarawak	5	1.0
	Peribumi Semenanjung	1	.2
	Others	11	2.1
	University Diploma.	107	20.4
	Entry KPM	75	14.3
Qualification	Matriculation		
	Certificate / UM Foundation / UiTM		
	Foundation		
	Sijil Tinggi Agama Malaysia (STAM).	33	6.3
	Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia (STPM)	310	59.0

3. Findings

The effectiveness of EEP 1032 is measured by items which reflect the course learning objectives as stated in the syllabus and teaching module of EEP 1032. The 23 items or questions on the effectiveness of EEP 1032 are listed in the left most column of Table 2 as variables A1 to A23. Respondents were asked to state their level of agreement on the effectiveness of EEP 1032 in achieving each of the 23 CLOs on a five point scale ranging from 1=strongly agree to 5=strongly disagree. Therefore, a lower attribute value indicates a higher level of agreement on

the effectiveness of EEP 1032 in achieving the stated CLO. Table 2 presents the descriptive of the variables A1 to A23. The value of skew-ness and kurtosis for all the variables A1 to A23 conforms to the rule of thumb that considers a variable as reasonably close to normal if its skew-ness and kurtosis values are between -1.0 and +1.0. Thus, the data are suited for parametric statistical analyses.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for EEP 1032 variables

EEP 1032 has helped me to ...	Mean	SD
A1. Understand personal development	2.48	1.137
A2. Understand character building	2.48	1.087
A3. Learn to develop good character	2.55	1.073
A4. Understand good personal traits important for individual success	2.33	1.119
A5. Understand bad personal traits that can lead to individual failure	2.40	1.121
A6. Learn moral and ethical values	2.36	1.140
A7. Be aware of own prejudices	2.55	1.043
A8. Accept that other people can have different opinions	2.15	1.160
A9. Learn to accept feedback	2.24	1.111
A10. Learn to give feedback	2.37	1.034
A11. Identify personal strengths and weaknesses	2.37	1.067
A12. Develop personal strengths	2.47	1.064
A13. Improve personal weaknesses	2.44	1.078
A14. Develop leadership skills	2.51	1.096
A15. Develop critical thinking skills	2.55	1.065
A16. Develop problem solving skills	2.49	1.082
A17. Develop good personality	2.42	1.129
A18. Develop good virtues	2.35	1.102
A19. Encouraged to be ambitious	2.38	1.135
A20. Encouraged to develop career plans	2.44	1.106
A21. Identify career opportunities	2.49	1.140
A22. Improve human relationship skills	2.27	1.073
A23. Develop personal strengths	2.40	1.102

The sample mean scores for all the items A1 to A23 are less than 3 indicating that students in the sample agree that EEP 1032 has achieved each of the 23 CLOs. A one sample t-test was conducted on each of the variables A1 to A23 to evaluate whether the sample mean scores for each EEP 1032 learning objective represented by variables A1 to A23 are statistically significant.

Ho: Effectiveness of EEP 1032 learning/lesson objective A(n) ≥ 3

(Interpretation: EEP 1032 learning objective A(n) is not achieved, $n=1,2,3,...,23$)

H1: Effectiveness of EEP 1032 learning/lesson objective A(n) < 3

(Interpretation: EEP 1032 learning objective A(n) is achieved, $n=1,2,3,...,23$)

The results of the t-tests are presented in Table 3. The t-test results are statistically significant for all tested variables A1 to A23. Thus, the null hypotheses that students perceived EEP 1032 as not effective in achieving the course learning objectives which are represented by A1 to A23 are rejected. The results support the conclusion that students agree that EEP 1032 was somewhat effective in achieving the course learning objectives represented by statements A1 to A23.

Table 3: One sample t-test Results of EEP 1032 learning objectives (N = 525)

EEP 1032 has helped me to ...	Mean	Std. Dev	One sample t-test (Test value=3)	p
A1. Understand personal development	2.48	1.137	-10.482	.00
A2. Understand character building	2.48	1.087	-11.043	.00
A3. Learn to develop good character	2.55	1.073	-9.554	.000
A4. Understand good personal traits important for individual success	2.33	1.119	-13.688	.00
A5. Understand bad personal traits that can lead to individual failure	2.40	1.121	-12.227	.00
A6. Learn moral and ethical values	2.36	1.140	-12.905	.00
A7. Be aware of own prejudices	2.55	1.043	-9.794	.00
A8. Accept that other people can have different opinions	2.15	1.160	-16.712	.00
A9. Learn to accept feedback	2.24	1.111	-15.595	.00
A10. Learn to give feedback	2.37	1.034	-13.970	.00
A11. Identify personal strengths and weaknesses	2.37	1.067	-13.498	.00
A12. Develop personal strengths	2.47	1.064	-11.366	.00
A13. Improve personal weaknesses	2.44	1.078	-11.899	.00

A14. Develop leadership skills	2.51	1.096	-10.315	.00
A15. Develop critical thinking skills	2.55	1.065	-9.715	.00
A16. Develop problem solving skills	2.49	1.082	-10.731	.00
A17. Develop good personality	2.42	1.129	-11.831	.00
A18. Develop good virtues	2.35	1.102	-13.471	.00
A19. Encouraged to be ambitious	2.38	1.135	-12.531	.00
A20. Encouraged to develop career plans	2.44	1.106	-11.639	.00
A21. Identify career opportunities	2.49	1.140	-10.259	.00
A22. Improve human relationship skills	2.27	1.073	-15.574	.00
A23. Develop personal strengths	2.40	1.102	-12.520	.00

Lower scores indicate higher level of agreement by respondents on the attainment of the course learning objective. As such, the lower the mean score, the higher the level of agreement amongst students on the effectiveness of EEP 1032 in achieving that particular course learning objective. Based on the sample mean scores, the EEP1032 lesson objective ranked as most effectively achieved is A8 (accepting that other people can have different opinions) and the least effectively achieved are A3 (learning to develop good character), A7 (being aware of own prejudices) and A15 (developing critical thinking skills). The effectiveness of EEP1032 in achieving the lesson objectives A1 to A23, ranked from most effective to least effective, is presented in Table 4

Table 4: Effectiveness Ranking of EEP 1032 learning/lesson objective (N = 525)

Ranking	EEP 1032 has helped me to ...	Mean Score
1. (most effective)	A8. Accept that other people can have different opinions	2.15
2.	A9. Learn to accept feedback	2.24
3.	A22. Improve human relationship skills	2.27
4.	A4. Understand good personal traits important for individual success	2.33
5.	A18. Develop good virtues	2.35
6.	A6. Learn moral and ethical values	2.36
7.	A10. Learn to give feedback	2.37

8.	A11. Identify personal strengths and weaknesses	2.37
9.	A19. Encouraged to be ambitious	2.38
10.	A5. Understand bad personal traits that can lead to individual failure	2.4
11.	A23. Develop personal strengths	2.4
12.	A17. Develop good personality	2.42
13.	A13. Improve personal weaknesses	2.44
14.	A20. Encouraged to develop career plans	2.44
15.	A12. Develop personal strengths	2.47
16.	A1. Understand personal development	2.48
17.	A2. Understand character building	2.48
18.	A16. Develop problem solving skills	2.49
19.	A21. Identify career opportunities	2.49
20.	A14. Develop leadership skills	2.51
21.	A3. Learn to develop good character	2.55
(least effective)		
22.	A7. Be aware of own prejudices	2.55
(least effective)		
23.	A15. Develop critical thinking skills	2.55
(least effective)		
	AMean (Mean score of A1 to A23)	2.41

4. Discussion

The quantitative analysis on the data on EEP 1032 revealed that the following CLOs were perceived students as least effectively achieved

- A15. Develop critical thinking skills
- A3. Learn to develop good character
- A7. Be aware of own prejudices

In line with the findings of this study, we put forward the following recommendations for consideration to improve future programs such as the EEP 1032

i. Provide greater emphasis in development of critical thinking skills in future programs

Taking into account the students' feedback on how EEP1032 can be improved to help students in personal development and character building, the researcher would like to suggest that future programs incorporate a unit

on critical thinking to educate students on the tools and techniques to become a critical thinker and creative problem solver. A sample unit on this topic can be found in a book entitled *Peak Performance Success in College and Beyond* (Sharon, 2015). Many ethical issues are multi-dimensional and complex and require critical thinking skills to evaluate the perspectives of various stakeholders (Wong, n.d.).

ii. Introduce service learning projects in future programs

The researcher would like to recommend the acceleration of adoption of service learning projects which are integrated into subject curriculum as well as stand alone on-campus service projects (OCSPs). Service learning is an effective approach in character education. In service-learning projects, young people take on a hands approach to identify community needs and develop and implement solutions to meet those needs (Billig, Jesse, & Grimley, 2008). As pointed out by two students, *"...buat lah aktiviti kemasyarakatan bukannya dok membebel pung pang pung pang, students mengantok dengar ceramah je..."* and *"...can make us to go visit to old folk house which have multiracial of races in the old folk home and communicating with them..."*

iii. Introduce awareness training on unconscious bias

Unconscious biases can lead to bad decisions and unethical action. According to Velasquez (Velasquez, 2012), our prejudices about the world, about others, and about oneself is an obstacle to ethical behaviour. This is because there are four steps leading towards ethical behaviour. The four steps are as follows

- Step One: Recognizing a situation is an ethical situation
 - Step Two: Judging the ethical course of action.
 - Step Three: Deciding to do the ethical course of action
 - Step Four: Carrying out the ethical decision.
- In step two, our ability to assess the ethical course of action can curtailed by our biased theories about the world, about others, and about oneself.

Unconscious bias has been identified as one of the main reasons for lack of workplace diversity (Buckley, 2014). In view of the aforesaid, the research further recommends the

introduction of awareness training in line with those practised by many large corporations (Olson, 2015).

5. Conclusion

This study has provided some insights on the effectiveness of a campus wide program that was implemented by a Malaysian public university between 2011-2013 that aimed to facilitate personal development and character building among its fresh undergraduates. Based on these insights, several recommendations were advanced for improvement of future programs. It is hoped that this study could contribute towards the national discourse on efforts to enhance the employability of Malaysian graduates and to produce balanced graduates who are not only knowledgeable but have good character and are ethical

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